

Polk School Board approves purchase of land for new Poinciana-area high school

This article may be read at;

<https://www.theledger.com/story/news/education/2026/01/30/polk-county-florida-district-approves-purchase-of-land-for-new-poinciana-area-school/88403146007/>



[Gary White](#)

Lakeland Ledger

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- The Polk County School Board approved a \$10 million land purchase for a new high school in the Poinciana area.
- This is the first time the district is using a public-private partnership to build a new school.
- Some board members raised concerns about the land being in a flood zone and a previously failed purchase attempt.

The Polk County School Board has approved the purchase of 72.3 acres selected as the [site for a new high school](#) in the Poinciana area.

The board voted 5-2 to approve the \$10 million purchase at its Jan. 27 meeting. Members William Allen and Travis Keyes voted against the action.

Polk County Public Schools is pursuing a private-public partnership for development of the school site, at Bayberry Street and Dogwood Road in unincorporated Polk County. The board approved a land-assignment contract included in an interim agreement with Fortress Secured LLC, the developer.

The contract formalized the transfer of the designated land from the current property owner KK Cattle LLC, to the district. The action allows the process to move into contract negotiations, design and construction, an agenda item said.

The deal involves the purchase of 62.5 acres and the acceptance of another 9.7 acres donated by Fortress Secured.

The district signed the interim [agreement with Fortress](#) in April 2025. District officials have said that a new high school is desperately needed in northeast Polk County, as enrollment in [existing area schools exceeds their capacities](#).



This is the first time the Polk district is using a public-private partnership arrangement to build a new school.

In discussions during a work session before the meeting, Allen and Keyes raised various concerns about the project, leading to expressions of frustration from other board members.

Allen reminded other members that the School Board voted in 2021 to purchase property in the same area for a school, but the district never completed the purchase, for reasons that remain unclear. Polk School Superintendent Fred Heid said the lapse occurred around the time he was coming on board.

Heid said he recalled that there were concerns about wetlands that might be off limits to development. He said the current project involves a “smaller footprint” of the same property, with some of the wetlands excluded.

The agenda packet included several appraisals of the property from different companies. Keyes said that every appraisal placed at least 65% of the land in “flood zone A.” That FEMA category describes land with a 1% annual chance of flooding.

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Joshua McLemore, the district's director of planning and real estate, said that flood zone A is a broad category for land with the potential for flooding. He said that Fortress and its contactor, Rodda Construction, have done soil testing and determined that the land "is not as wet as you think it is."

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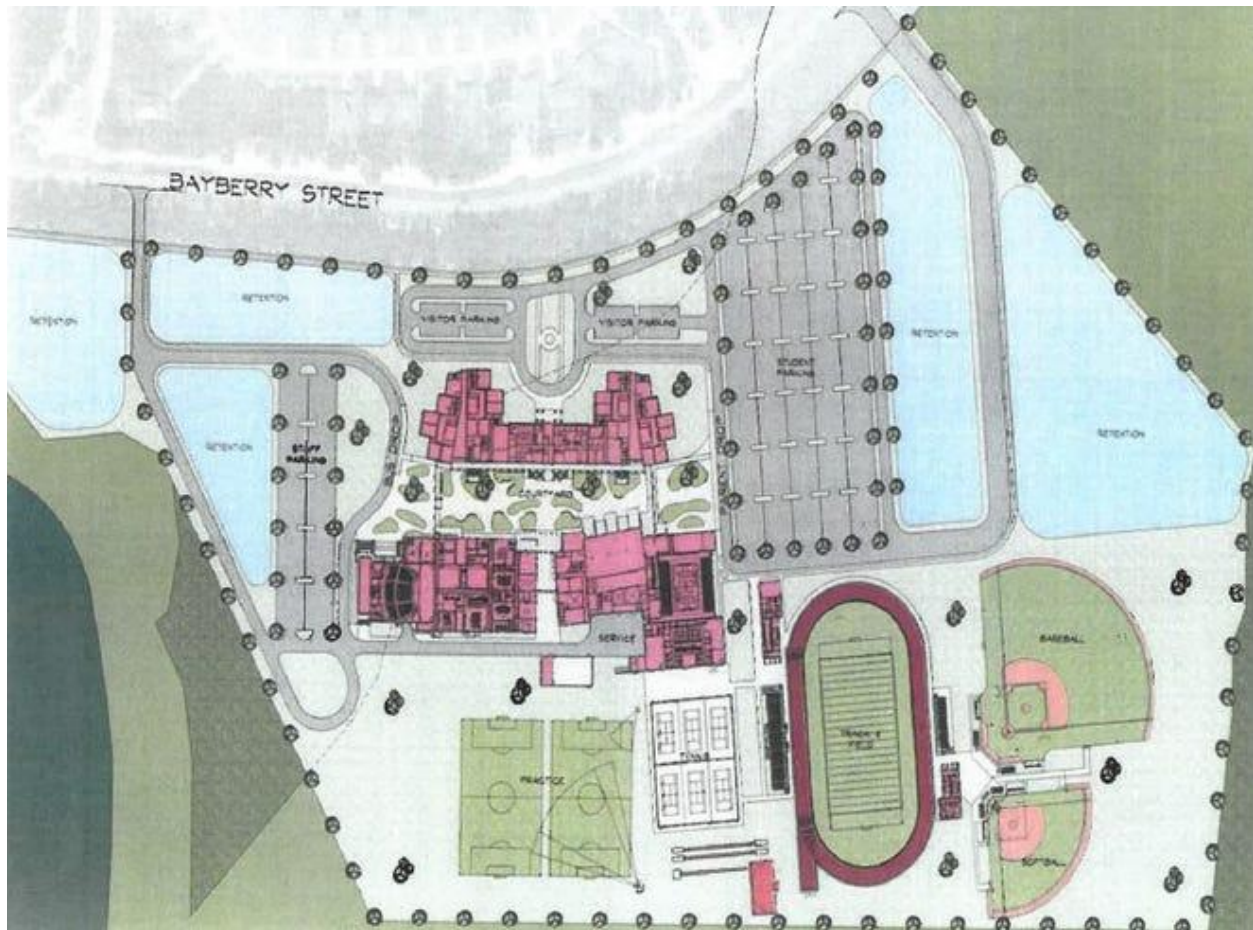
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The contractor is submitting documents to FEMA to have the land map revised, McLemore said.

Keyes asked whether the district would face any financial penalty for delaying the land transfer. James Greene, the district's general counsel, said there would be no contractual penalty, but he reminded board members that the district is on a tight timeline to meet its goal of opening the school in fall 2028.

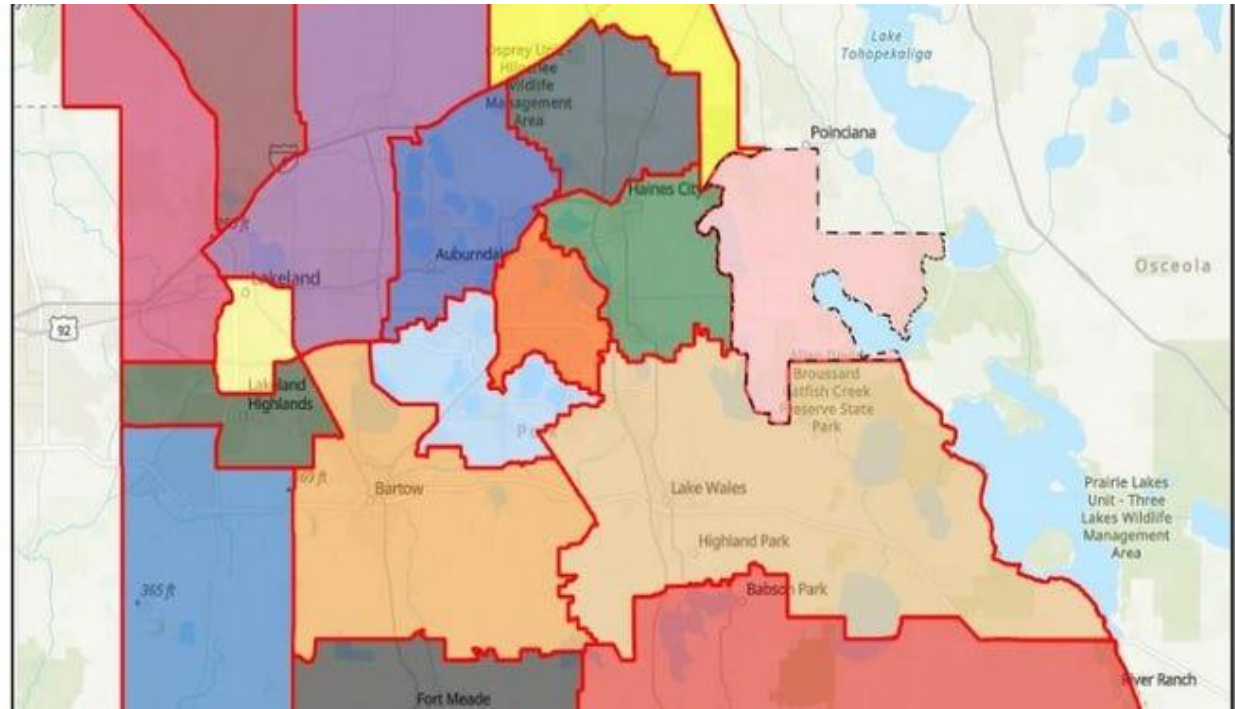


The agreement calls for ground to be broken this spring, Greene said. Heid said the district would potentially lose money it has already spent on the project if it walked away now.

Keyes suggested holding off on the land transfer because of “all of these doubts and questions we have.” At another point, he said, “I think [there are better sites](#) still available.”

The School Board had already postponed a planned vote on the land transfer. During the work session, members considered delaying a vote until the next meeting on Feb. 10.

But Heid and board members Lisa Miller and Kay Fields all used variations on the same phrase — “kicking the can down the road” — to argue against further delays.



“I’m not sure why we’re not going to just vote this up or down,” Miller said. “This has been going on (since) November. When we say ‘we’ve’ had a lot of questions — my questions were answered probably late November, early December.”

She added: “This process is not new to us. I think — we can’t have it both ways to where we don’t support building portable cities (at overcrowded schools), but we take this long to make a decision. We have to make hard decisions.”

Under the terms of the interim agreement, the project is now in phase three of the design work, meaning that design is about 90% completed, Greene said.

The projected cost of the high school project is about \$180 million.

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